

# **Are Year 12 students interested in English and do they value it?**

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## **Introduction**

Motivation is an essential prerequisite to academic achievement (Pajares & Urdan, 2006) . It influences what, how and when students learn (Schunk, 1995). It helps students focus on their learning, persist when they encounter difficulties, ask for assistance if needed and apply the necessary effort and strategies to succeed (Zimmerman, 2000). However, although motivation is of critical importance to academic achievement, research indicates that students' intrinsic motivation in academic subjects tends to decline as students progress through the secondary system (Gottfried, Fleming, & Gottfried, 2001; Hidi, 2001; Lepper, Corpus, & Iyengar, 2005). A greater understanding of motivation in academic settings will therefore assist researchers and teachers identify ways to enhance students' learning and achievement (Hulleman, Durik, Schweigert, & Harackiewicz, 2008).

This paper focuses on motivation in English, as students' motivation for English as a subject, has received limited attention internationally (Greene, Miller, Crowson, Duke, & Akey, 2004; Murphy & Alexander, 2000). Also researchers have found that it is important to focus research on students' academic motivation in domain-specific areas as motivation very subject specific (Pintrich, 1994). However, motivation as a construct is too complex to examine in its own right (Harlen, 2006). As a result most researchers tend to examine specific components of motivation, rather than motivation per se.

For the purposes of this paper, the value component of the expectancy-value model of achievement motivation and behaviour developed by Eccles and her colleagues (e.g., Eccles (Parsons), et al., 1983; Wigfield, 1994; Wigfield & Eccles, 1992, 2000) will be used as a framework to examine whether students value English as a subject and whether they are interested in English. Expectancy component focuses on expectancy for success, while the value component focuses in on why students may or may not value a task or subject (Eccles (Parsons), et al., 1983). Optimum motivation is likely to arise when a student expects to succeed at a task and values that task. . The value component has been selected, as helping students find value and meaning in English may enhance their motivation and achievement in this subject (Brophy, 1999; Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000). Furthermore, there has been less attention given to the value aspects of motivation compared with the expectancy aspects (e.g., competence and ability beliefs)(Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) .

## **Value Components of the Expectancy-Value Theory**

Eccles et al. (Eccles (Parsons), et al., 1983; Wigfield, 1994; Wigfield & Eccles, 1992, 2000), have identified four value components in their model. These are; attainment value (doing well), intrinsic value (interest and enjoyment), utility value (usefulness) and cost (Eccles (Parsons), et al., 1983; Wigfield & Eccles, 1992). Cost has been defined as, “the negative aspects of engaging in the task”, such as the amount of effort required to succeed, fear of failure, and the opportunities lost to engage in other things while engaging in this task (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000, p. 280). Research undertaken by Eccles and Wigfield (1991, cited in Wigfield & Eccles, 1992) found the three value factors, attainment, intrinsic and utility, were clearly distinguished empirically in a large scale longitudinal and cross section studies.

Empirical research has found that task values have been shown to predict students’ intention and actual decisions to continue with mathematics and English (e.g., Eccles (Parsons), et al., 1983; Wigfield & Eccles, 1992). Values have also been correlated with achievement (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008). As Schunk et al. (2008) note values can influence learning indirectly, because students who value what they are doing are more likely to persist at tasks and thus enhance their knowledge, skills and success. This is also likely to positively impact on students’ competence beliefs.

### **Interest**

Although studies have found that the task values are empirically distinguishable, the intrinsic value component needs to be further differentiated to recognise the distinction between interest and intrinsic motivation. While there may be considerable overlap between interest and intrinsic motivation, Bandura (1986) argues that these constructs are different. Renninger (2000) also notes that, although interest and intrinsic motivation appear similar, their outcomes are different. Empirical research findings have repeatedly confirmed that a student’s level of interest can have a powerful influence on learning (Ainley, Hidi, & Berndorff, 2002; Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, Carter, & Elliot, 2000; Hidi & Renninger, 2006; McDaniel, Waddill, Finstad, & Bourg, 2000).

Two types of qualitatively different types of interest have been identified. and extensively examined; these are situational interest and individual interest (e.g., Ainley, Hillman, & Hidi, 2002; Bergin, 1999; Chen, Darst, & Pangrazi, 2001) Situational interest refers to “focused attention and affective reaction that is triggered by environmental stimuli, which may or may not last over time” (Hidi & Renninger, 2006, p. 113) Individual interest refers to a person’s relatively enduring predisposition “to gravitate toward, respond positively to and appreciate certain classes of stimuli across situations” (Durik & Harackiewicz, 2007, p. 598). While there is debate about how situational interest and individual interest differ (Renninger, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000), there is general agreement that “there is significant overlap and that each is critical for optimal learning experiences” (Durik & Harackiewicz, 2007, p. 597)

The purpose of this paper is to explore Year 12 students' interest in English and the degree to which they value English. The aim is to provide English teachers with insights into the value and interest aspects of motivation that will assist them in enhancing students' motivation for studying English.

## **Method**

### *Overview*

This paper is part of a larger piece of research examining Year 12 students' perceptions of factors that influence their motivation in level 2 NCEA English achievement standards. As part of the larger study participants have completed 11 questionnaires over a 12 month period. A mixed methods research design has been employed. The decision is driven by the research questions, which cannot be fully answered by either quantitative or qualitative methods.

### *Participants*

One hundred and sixteen Year 12 students (32.5% males and 67.5% females) volunteered to participate in this study. They were drawn from ten traditional A English classes across two large New Zealand co-educational high schools (decile 5 and decile 6) from a pool of 232 Year 12 students (37.5% male and 62.5% female). Traditional A English classes were selected as all the students are deemed to be competent or very competent in English, based on their NCEA level 1 English results. Participants identified themselves as Pakeha/New Zealand European (69.8%), Pakeha – Maori (18.1%), Maori (5.2%), English (2.6%), Cook Island Maori (0.9%), Indian (0.9%), Brazilian (0.9%) and South African (0.9%).

### *Measures*

The focus of this paper is participants' responses to four of the 20 questions in the first of the 11 questionnaires they have completed. Three of the four questions sought to ascertain students' interest in English as a subject and the fourth question focused whether they valued it. One question asked students to rank their six Year 12 subjects from the most interesting to the least interesting using a nominal scale. Another question asked if they found any aspects of English interesting ('Yes' or 'No'). If they answered 'Yes' they were asked to identify up to two aspects of English they found most interesting and to explain why they found these aspects interesting. The next question asked if they found any aspects of English boring ('Yes' or 'No'). If they answered 'Yes' they were asked to identify up to two aspects of English they found most boring and to explain why they found these aspects boring. The last of the four questions asked students whether they would have chosen to take English in Year 12 if it was optional ('Yes' or 'No'). They were asked to give a reason for their 'Yes' or 'No' answer.

## Preliminary Results

### *Ranking of English*

Participants ranked their six Year 12 subjects from the most interesting to the least interesting two months after beginning Year 12. The rankings were analysed across all participants to determine the percentage of students who ranked English as their most interesting to least interesting subject. The results, presented in Table 1, indicate that the majority of students (73.3%) ranked English as their third, fourth or fifth most interesting subject. An analysis by gender indicated there are similarities in the percentages of males and females ranking English as their third, fourth or fifth most interesting subject, although a greater percentage of males, compared with females, ranked English as their least interesting subject. Caution must be noted when examining these results, as this is a nominal scale. Students might have ranked English as their fifth most interesting subject but still find English quite interesting, while others may have ranked English as their third most interesting subject and yet not find English particularly interesting.

Table 1:

Students ranking of how interesting they find English compared to their other five Year 12 subjects

Subject Ranking of English						
	1st	2nd	3rd	4 <sup>th</sup>	5th	6th
<b>Students (n=116)</b>	2.6% (3)	10.3% (12)	25.0% (29)	25.0% (29)	23.3% (27)	13.8% (16)
<b>Males (n=38)</b>	0% (0)	0% (0)	23.7% (9)	23.7% (9)	28.9% (11)	23.7% (9)
<b>Females (n=78)</b>	3.8% (3)	15.4% (12)	25.6% (20)	25.6% (20)	20.5% (16)	9.0% (7)

To provide a comparison participants' ranking of mathematics has also been included. Unlike English, mathematics is not compulsory in Year 12. However, most participants elected to enrol in Mathematics. Table 2 indicates that the majority of participants (67.3%) ranked mathematics as their fifth or sixth most interesting subject, suggesting that they tend to find mathematics less interesting than English. However, these results do not necessarily indicate that participants find mathematics uninteresting, rather that many find it less interesting than English. A similar pattern is evident when analysed by gender.

Table 2:

Students ranking of how interesting they find mathematics compared to their other five Year 12 subjects

Subject Ranking of Mathematics						
	1st	2nd	3rd	4 <sup>th</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup>	6th
<b>Students (n=109)</b>	0.9% (1)	6.9% (8)	5.2% (6)	13.8% (16)	20.7% (24)	46.6% (54)
<b>Males (n=37)</b>	0% (0)	2.6% (1)	10.5% (4)	10.5% (4)	21.1% (8)	52.6% (20)
<b>Females (n=72)</b>	1.3% (1)	9.0% (7)	2.6% (2)	15.4% (12)	20.5% (16)	43.6% (34)

Twenty-six different subjects were identified as the most interesting by participants. Of those, physical education (12.9%), media studies (10.3%), drama (8.6%) and computing (8.6%) were deemed the four most interesting subjects (c.f. English, 2.6%).

#### *Aspects of English Deemed Interesting*

Participants' responses to the question "*Do you find any aspects of English interesting?*" 'Yes' or 'No' are displayed in Table 3. The results indicate that the majority find aspects of English interesting. A very similar pattern emerges when the results are analysed by gender.

Table 3:

Students' response to whether they find anything interesting about English

	Yes	No	No response
<b>Students (n=116)</b>	<b>70.7% (82)</b>	<b>29.3% (34)</b>	<b>0.0% (0)</b>
<b>Males (n=37)</b>	<b>71.1% (27)</b>	<b>28.9% (11)</b>	<b>0.0% (0)</b>
<b>Females (n=72)</b>	<b>70.5% (55)</b>	<b>29.5% (23)</b>	<b>0.0% (0)</b>

Those participants who answered 'Yes' were asked to list up to two aspects of English they found most interesting. Thirty-two participants identified 1 aspect, 35 identified 2 aspects, 7 identified 3 aspects, 4 identified 4 aspects and 4 identified nothing, but ticked 'Yes'.

This qualitative information was analysed thematically in two ways. Firstly participants' responses were analysed for statements that indicated interest, enjoyment/liking and competence, as it became apparent that students had confused interest at times with enjoyment/liking (e.g., *"I enjoy creative writing as it gives me a chance to be more in control of what I write"* – male) and competence (e.g., *"Writing, as this is my strongest area and where I generally do well"* – male). This is in spite of the concept of interest being explicitly explained in the questionnaire. Not all responses included statements about interest, enjoyment or competence though (e.g., *"Watching movies"* – male).

Evidence in the analysis of these results indicates that the differentiation between enjoyment/liking and interest is important. This is borne out by the example above where the student liked the sense of control that he perceives is possible with creative writing. His statement does not suggest he finds creative writing interesting though. The same applies to some statements made in relation to competence, such as in the example above.

The analysis of the statements that contained references to any of the three themes revealed that 44 references were made to enjoyment/liking and 37 references to interest, with only 7 references being made to competence. A similar pattern emerged when analysed by gender.

Secondly, statements were also analysed to identify aspects of English participants found interesting (or enjoyed or were competent at). These covered a broad spectrum of what is often focused on in NCEA English. Participants identified and made references (noted in brackets after each aspect) to the following: analysis (26), creative writing (20), film (19), research (12), novels (12), speeches (9), essays (9), static images (8), poetry (2), unfamiliar text (2), reading (2), and as miscellaneous aspects (15) (e.g., using vocabulary to impress others, enjoying learning about human rights' issues). Of those aspects listed above, analysis, creative writing and film were identified more frequently by all participants than other aspects as being most interesting. It is difficult to draw any conclusions beyond these three aspects, given the large number of different aspects identified. While female patterns were similar to that of all participants, male patterns differed slightly, with film (10) and analysis (7) being most often identified, followed by creative writing (5).

As noted above, it is the process of analysing that was the most frequently identified as the aspect that interested all participants (31.7%, n=26 references). Statements such as, *"I like watching the movies, reading books and analysing them... because you see a different side you didn't think about in it and a lot of hidden symbolism"* (female), and *"Analysing short texts – understanding the imagery always intrigues me"* (female), indicated that participants

clearly valued the opportunity to understand and see novels, films, short stories and poetry in different ways.

With the exception of 'analysis', it is difficult to identify any definite patterns as to why students might find an particular aspect interesting (enjoyable), because participants gave such varied reasons for finding the same aspect interesting /enjoyable. For example, with film one participant noted that *"I like the film study because it lets you see the movie in a different way."* (female), while another noted, *"Movies – I get to watch a movie"* ( male).

#### *Aspects of English Deemed Boring*

Participants' responses to the question *"Do you find any aspects of English boring?"* 'Yes' or 'No' are displayed in Table 4. The results indicate that the majority of participants find aspects of English boring, with a greater percentage of males than females indicating this.

Table 4

Students' response to whether they find anything boring about English

	Yes	No	No response
<b>students (n=116)</b>	<b>69.0% (80)</b>	<b>29.3% (34)</b>	<b>1.7% (2)</b>
<b>Males (n=37)</b>	<b>81.6% (31)</b>	<b>18.4% (7)</b>	<b>0.0% (0)</b>
<b>Females (n=72)</b>	<b>62.8% (49)</b>	<b>34.6% (27)</b>	<b>2.6% (2)</b>

Also of note is that 12.1% (n=14) of participants did not find any aspects interesting about English, but nor did they find any aspects boring. As one female participant noted, *"I enjoy English – it's not boring. However, I do not find it overly interesting."*

Those participants who answered 'Yes' were asked to list up to two aspects of English they found most boring and explain why they found these aspects boring. Thirty-eight participants identified 1 aspect, 35 identified 2 aspects, 3 identified 3 aspects, 1 identified 4 aspects and 3 identified nothing, but ticked 'Yes'.

This qualitative information was analysed thematically in two ways. Firstly participants' responses were analysed for statements that indicated a lack of interest (boring), a disliking or a lack of competence for the same reasons as noted in the previous section.

The analysis of the statements that contained references to any of the three themes revealed that more references (noted in brackets) were made to lack of interest (34). However, a third (27) of the references were to disliking aspects of English, followed closely

by a lack of competence (22) A similar pattern emerged when the references were analysed by gender. It is possible that lack of competence becomes more influential in how students perceive aspects of English

Statements were also analysed to identify aspects of English participants found uninteresting (or disliked or believed they were incompetent at). Participants identified and made references (noted in brackets after each aspect) to the following: essays (33), novels (11), reading and reading logs (11), speeches (10), creative writing (7), formal writing (7), poetry (5), static images (5), unfamiliar text (4), Shakespeare (4), research (4), analysis (2) film (2), and some miscellaneous aspects (10). Of those aspects identified, essay writing stood out as the most uninteresting, not enjoyable or difficult aspect of English. An analysis by gender revealed the same finding, with essays being most frequently identified. An examination of the reasons why students identified essays as an aspect they found most boring included comments such as; *“boring”, “don’t know what to write”, “takes too much effort”, “my hand gets sore”, and “can’t be creative.”*

### *Valuing of English*

In recognition that English is compulsory in Year 12, participants were asked, *“If you had had a choice would you have selected English as a subject this year? Yes or No”* The results displayed in Table 5 indicate that most participants would choose to do English in Year 12.

Table 5:

Students’ response to whether they would choose English if it was optional in Year 12

	Yes	No	No response
<b>students (n=116)</b>	<b>82.9% (102)</b>	<b>11.2% (13)</b>	<b>0.9% (1)</b>
<b>Males (n=37)</b>	<b>84.2% (32)</b>	<b>15.8% (6)</b>	<b>0.0% (0)</b>
<b>Females (n=72)</b>	<b>89.7% (70)</b>	<b>9.0% (7)</b>	<b>1.3% (1)</b>

Participants were asked to give a reason for choosing or not choosing English. Nearly a third (32.8%) chose to give more than one reason. The 13 participants who would not choose to do English if they had a choice indicated they disliked it (n=6), found it boring (n=2), or lacked competence (n=3) (e.g., *“I do not like English very much as it is my weak point.” - male*). One gave no reason.

The responses of those who indicated they would choose to do Year 12 English were analysed to identify statements relating to intrinsic interest (liking English), utility value



(e.g., useful for a career) and attainment value (doing well). Utility value clearly stood out as the main reason why participants valued English, with 111 references to why it was/would be useful to them. There were 27 references to enjoying English (e.g., *"Because I like English and enjoy it"* - female) and 7 references to doing well in English. Interesting 14.7% (n=17) participants identified English as being enjoyable/interesting and having utility value (e.g., *"I enjoy English. It is a subject that is good to have on your CV"* – male). These were predominantly females though (n=13).

Utility value was further analysed to determine if there were sub themes within this category. Most references (46) were made to its general usefulness (e.g., *"It is an important subject which will be useful in the future"* – male). This was closely followed by 32 references to its usefulness for a career (e.g., *"Because I need it for my future career choice"* – female), 18 references to needing it to gain University Entrance and 15 references to needing it for University. It is clear that while participants may not always find English interesting or enjoyable, most value English for its usefulness and would choose to take it if it was optional.

### **Discussion Points and Future Research**

- These are preliminary results. Much more analysis has yet to occur in the larger study, that this data set is part of.
- More detailed information is required about what students specifically find interesting or boring about a particular aspect of English. English teachers may find it insightful and valuable to ask for specific feedback from students prior to, during and after studying a particular aspect (e.g., a novel). This will encourage reflection and show respect for students' views.
- There is a need to capitalise on analysis more.
- There is the issue of essays being seen in such a negative light. This needs closer examination to find solutions (e.g., more effective feedback, paired writing).
- Most participants clearly value English. How can this be further capitalised on and enhanced? Furthermore, how do students come to acquire/hold the general utility value for English? (e.g., *"I think it is important for life"* – female).
- Participants' responses were collected in March 2010. In what ways might their interest in and valuing of English change after completing Year 12? This is being explored in the larger study.
- These results are from students who have succeeded in NCEA level 1 English. How different is their interest in and their valuing of English compared with those who have not been particularly successful in NCEA level 1?
- There are no marked gender differences in patterns of interest or valuing. Would that change with a less successful group?

## Conclusion

The fact that so many participants valued English is significant, because this means that they are more likely to apply effort, persist and prioritise their work in English over some other subjects, even if they find it less enjoyable or less interesting than teachers would like. However, the challenge remains as to how to increase students' interest in and enjoyment of English.

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